

# BLOOD SPORE

Of murder and mushrooms

By Hamilton Morris

In July 2011, on the hottest day of the year, I received a fragile-looking Maxell compact cassette from a retired psychology professor and gerbil-aggression researcher named Gary Davis. I had been told the cassette contained a recording of two police officers discussing their involvement in the robbery and murder of one Steven Pollock, a physician and pioneering mycologist who—despite invaluable contributions to the field, including an improved technique for growing psychedelic mushrooms on Purina Dog Chow—remains largely unknown. Carefully labeled **POLICE CROOK 6/17/81**, the cassette had for thirty years been stored in a toolbox under two dozen inoperative WWII-era Geiger counters in Davis's mother's house. I had offered to pay for the tape but Davis refused, insisting he just wanted it to be heard by as many people as possible, then backtracking and suggesting he wouldn't mind terribly if I sent him twenty dollars for beer. I was worried about the tape's integrity and had been reading anxiously about the myriad problems that befall aging magnetic media—binder embrittlement, remanence reduction, even fungal contamination—and the transaction was further charged by a stern warning

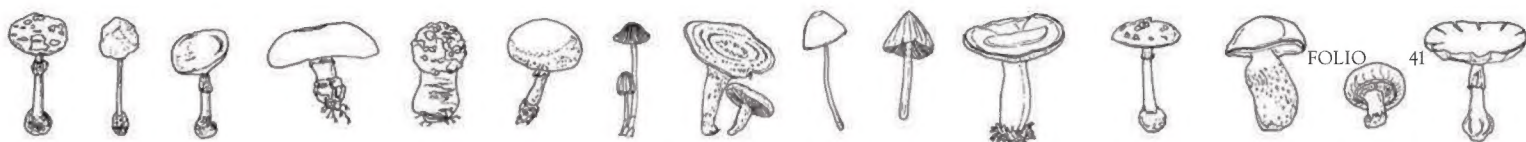


from another source: “This information should be treated with due caution. Some of these cops, if still living, could be very dangerous.”

The warning was delivered by Paul Stamets, who had told me about the tape but never actually heard it. Once a friend of Pollock's, Stamets has in recent decades become recognized as the foremost

authority on medicinal mushrooms: a taxonomist, author, cultivator extraordinaire, and general fungal hype-man, Stamets travels the country giving lectures on the different ways mushrooms can save both the planet and the human race. It was at one of these lectures, titled “How Mushrooms Can Help Save the World,” that I first had the opportunity to question Stamets in person about the story of the tape. In a sold-out room with theatrically dimmed lights, Stamets begins by opening a specially designed carrying case and removing a large, concentrically banded cylindrical fungus, which he then hoists above his head. “This is agarikon,” he declares with Mosaic solemnity, “and it will prove to be as important for the survival of the human race as the discovery of fire.” In agarikon, which really looks very much like an unfrosted layer

*Hamilton Morris's last article for Harper's Magazine, “I Walked with a Zombie,” appeared in the November 2011 issue. Page borders by Roderick Mills. Photography credits on page 56.*



cake, Stamets has detected potent antimicrobial compounds that he predicts will protect us from intercontinental viral storms destined to sweep the globe. He tells the audience of how he cured himself of a stammer with *Psilocybe*, treated his mother's breast cancer with *Trametes*, saved his aunt's home from carpenter-ant infestation with *Metarhizium*, and how mycelium—the filamentous network that absorbs nutrients into the fungus—is both earth's brain and the Internet's natural progenitor. He does all this wearing a hat made of mushrooms.

Listening to Stamets speak about fungi I think this must be what it was like to listen to Thomas

Edison talk about incandescence, the research so deliriously ambitious and diverse that it seems to teeter on the brink of insanity but, perhaps by virtue of its grounding in clinical studies and scientific publications, doesn't leave one feeling to be in the presence of a mountebank—somehow quite the opposite—and when Stamets utters his concluding

remarks he is rewarded by a rabid standing ovation. The audience wastes no time in swarming the stage in hopes that Stamets will be able to help them find fungal succor for their human woes, and I am, of course, no different. A man begins, in a somewhat accusatory tone, to inquire as to why his black-morel kit did not bear

fruit, to which Stamets reminds him there are no guarantees of fruition, offers a diplomatic handshake, and turns to the next person in line, which is me. I am hesitant to bring up the subject of Pollock in public, but the press of mycophiles on either side of me leaves me no choice. I tell Stamets I have obtained the Pollock tape and I think I can solve the murder, in response to which his face changes. “You know, Steve was assassinated by the police,” he says, suddenly unaware of his surroundings. The dissatisfied morel-kit customer takes a step backward toward the door.

**T**he tape, heavy with hiss and wow and flutter, was as Davis described, a forty-five-minute conversation between two men: one who appears to

be a police officer from Castle Hills, Texas, named Wayne Merchant, the other a self-described “burglar” whose name is unclear. Officer Merchant joins The Burglar in a diner where cheerful muzak unwinds on the radio, dishes clatter, and a cash register rings and the drawer shoots open. Unbeknownst to Officer Merchant, he is being recorded. The Burglar is distressed because he has been “fingered” for the “bull moose job” and “shooting up a guy.” He is facing serious “federal time.” It can be inferred that The Burglar knows much of the Castle Hills PD personally and is acting as an informant in the pursuit of a reduced sentence. The two discuss their involvement in an array of crimes, both petty and violent, before the conversation turns to the unsolved murder of Pollock.

**THE BURGLAR:** Ahrite, there's one more thing that I don't know how it got brought up, imma tell you what I heard. I heard on the street that *you did it*.

**WAYNE MERCHANT:** I did what?

**BURGLAR:** Pollock's death.

**MERCHANT:** Whose death?

**BURGLAR:** Pollock—that mushroom doctor.

**MERCHANT:** I don't even know the son of bitch, I don't even know where he lived.

**BURGLAR:** They got—they *claim*—that I did it, that I went in and killed him, robbed him and killed him for two hundred thousand cash, and killed him.

**MERCHANT:** Hmmmmmm.

**I**n August 1977 Gary Lincoff had not yet authored the *National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mushrooms*, nor was he yet the president of the North American Mycological Association or the chair of their prestigious Mycophagy Committee. His first book, *Toxic and Hallucinogenic Mushroom Poisoning*, was going to press that winter and, despite a lack of formal mycological training (he held only a BA in philosophy), he was on his way to becoming a world-class authority on bioactive mushrooms. He appeared professional, wore a suit, and publicly discussed the hallucinogenic varieties primarily in regard to modes of treatment for those who had consumed them. Yet he was part of a burgeoning group of mycologists whose interest in “toxic” mushrooms, particularly those of the genus *Psilocybe*, extended to their possible therapeutic applications. It was in that summer of 1977 that Lincoff attended the Second International Mycological Congress in Tampa, Florida.

Lincoff was particularly interested in a talk titled “The Hallucinogenic Species of the Ge-





nus *Psilocybe* in the World” being given by the leading *Psilocybe* taxonomist Gastón Guzmán. There was another IMC2 attendee who shared Lincoff’s fascination with Guzmán, but unlike Lincoff he wasn’t waiting in the air-conditioned convention center; instead he’d chosen to stand outside, conspicuously sorting mushrooms in front of a hand-painted Winnebago Chieftain that he had converted into a rolling mycological laboratory. This was Steven Pollock. Young, hirsute, and wearing a Day-Glo T-shirt, Pollock fixedly examined mushroom specimens in the parking lot, totally oblivious to the withering glances of academic passersby. Intrigued, Lincoff approached Pollock to ask what species he’d been collecting, and Pollock brought him inside the Winnebago to have a look. Pollock had outfitted the interior with an autoclave, petri dishes, desiccators, and everything else necessary to culture and preserve mushrooms on the road, plus stacks of his first book, *Magic Mushroom Cultivation* (1977). Lincoff immediately realized that he had met IMC2’s most interesting attendee, and so he didn’t hesitate to forgo the rest of the afternoon’s presentations when Pollock invited him to go hunting for a species of bluing *Panaeolus* rumored to grow on the outskirts of Tampa.

While magic mushrooms were still obscure throughout most of the world, Floridian farmers were some of the first to experience what Steven Pollock would later call “the psilocybian mushroom pandemic.” A 1972 field guide warned prospective mushroom hunters to

[a]void registering the stock-reaction “hippie” in the natives of the areas explored. Probably the old guise of mycology student will no longer serve as some “peace officers” will arrest any suspicious looking folks possessing field mushrooms regardless of species.

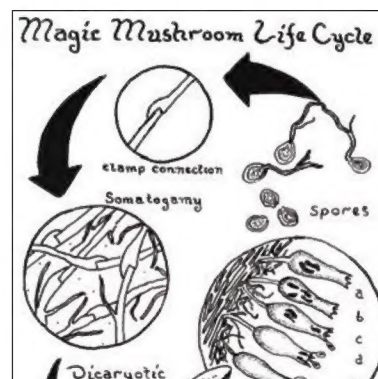
To some farmers the mushrooms were perks—with entrepreneurial flair they issued special blue buckets for twenty-five dollars a day as a means of formal *Psilocybe*-picking registration. But most farmers’ response was one of hostility; some would wait patiently until after a rainstorm, when the manure-loving mushrooms emerged, and then ambush and brutally beat those trespassing on their fields. Tensions had peaked the spring before Lincoff and Pollock visited, on the other coast in Parkland, where two unarmed men picking mushrooms under cover of night were discovered by a police officer named William Cobb, who shot them both in the back of the head. Cobb explained later in court that the shots had been fired in self-defense. In a practice

whose greatest danger had once been the misidentification of toadstools, a frightening new dynamic had emerged.

Both Pollock and Lincoff were bearded. One might even go so far as to say extremely bearded, certainly bearded enough that they could register “the stock-reaction ‘hippie.’” (Pollock’s hair was so voluminous that it often extended beyond the borders of photographs, his autopsy report correctly, if with understatement, observing that his hair was “full in amount with no alopecia.”) And so, not wishing to be shot, Lincoff and Pollock fastidiously flashed their IMC2 badges and politely asked farmers for permission. While searching a secluded field on their hands and knees, Pollock and Lincoff looked up to find themselves surrounded by a herd of milk cows. Pollock had written extensively about the history of Brahman cattle and how their dung and domestication influenced global mushroom distribution, and he assured Lincoff they weren’t at risk of being trampled. It was then that Pollock looked down between them and noticed a solitary specimen with an unusual appearance. It had a small, convex, caramel-colored cap undergirded by gills of a purple hue and a long flexuous stem that thickened ever so slightly at the base, where the faintest hint of indigo emerged like the vasculature beneath the skin of a human wrist.<sup>1</sup>

Pollock brought the mushroom back to his Winnebago laboratory, where he sterilized a scalpel, longitudinally bisected the specimen, and excised a small piece of internal stem tissue to culture on agar. On his journey back to San Antonio he observed a lens of mycelium slowly spreading across the media, developing the color of freshly torched crème brûlée. Weeks later Pollock noticed something else in the dish: stitched across the mycelium were glistening granules unlike anything he’d ever seen. Starting small, they grew into gnarled, doorknob-size masses of bruised flesh, blue and turquoise and purple in color. Pollock photographed them, dissected them, and—observing a long mycological tradition—he ate them. They had not the characteristic umami of fungi, but were nutty and tart, something like a mix of cashew and

<sup>1</sup> The mycologist Alan Rockefeller relates an alternative version of the story that sees Pollock and Lincoff in the pasture “smoking a doob,” which Pollock drops and then finds resting at the base of a new mushroom species. Lincoff insists that this version is apocryphal.





kiwifruit. Pollock soon came to realize this was an entirely new species, and he named it *Psilocybe tampanensis*, phoning Lincoff to declare that what they had discovered in Tampa was nothing less than the philosopher's stone. Though he would later write floridly that the species "clearly transport the fortunate consumer to states of spiritual transcendence and jubilation far beyond the realm of ordinary psychedelics," he reported his findings to the journal *Mycotaxon* with the restrained conclusion: "A bioassay ... has established that this fungus is psychoactive in man."

**P**ollock called it the philosopher's stone, and the rock of ages, the cosmic *camote*, the super-fantastic megagalactic *camotillo*, and several other things, but what he had eaten is properly termed

a sclerotium. Not to be confused with bulbs, caudices, corms, rhizomes, tubers, or other hypogeal swellings, the sclerotium is a structure unique to fungi. Though frequently equated with truffles (and in the case of *Psilocybe* now marketed as "psychedelic truffles"), the sclerotium's function is fundamentally different: whereas a truffle is a reproductive structure that attracts animals who post-digestively disperse its spores, a sclerotium is a vegetative structure that serves no direct reproductive purpose. If a given environment cannot support

the growth of a mushroom, the mycelium—a cottony subterranean net made of totipotent cells similar to animal stem cells—may produce a sclerotium. The mycelium's cellular threads bifurcate and fuse with one another repeatedly, forming a densely interwoven clod that can survive indefinitely and give rise to a mushroom should environmental conditions improve. Save for the seed and the spore itself there are few biological structures that rival the sclerotium's adamantine resilience; in certain species, sclerotia can survive being desiccated to the point of combustibility, subjected to freezing temperatures, mired in acidic soils, and deprived completely of nutrients. Some varieties quiesce for decades before sudden and

vigorous myceliogenesis, emerging phoenixlike from the ashes of burned forests.

All along the Mesoamerican biological corridor there is a history of slash-and-burn agriculture beginning with the Olmec. The same fire-farming ancient civilizations to record the first use of psilocybian mushrooms may have been unknowingly selecting for sclerotial character. Even as firestorms in excess of 2200 degrees Fahrenheit rage through a forest, the soil one foot below the surface remains thermally unbudged, cradling the fungus until the environment becomes favorable for growth. Forest fires are vital to the reproductive cycle for morels, for example, which sometimes wait a century or more for fire to initiate fruition. (Morels in turn inspire such gustatory lust that laws had to be enacted in eighteenth-century Germany to prevent the peasantry from burning down forests.) These fires were the only way to reliably produce morels, whose indoor cultivation proved impossible.<sup>2</sup>

In the kingdom of fungi the sclerotium assumes many forms. The Gogodala people of Papua New Guinea's Western Province live on a swampy alluvial soil completely devoid of the stones required to make hard tools; instead they seek out the mushroom *Pleurotus tuber-regium* and carve its giant sclerotia into club heads carried on hunting expeditions and into battle. The dark purple tendrils that emerge from florets of ryegrass parasitized by ergot, the culprit for the medieval scourge of St. Anthony's Fire, are also sclerotia, and it was the systematic study of ergot sclerotia by Albert Hofman that resulted in the discovery of LSD. There is a parasitic *Fibulorhizoctonia* species that forms sclerotia capable of mimicking the size and shape of common termite eggs so exactly that the termites nurture the sclerotia as their own brood, tirelessly salivating on them to maintain their moisture. With fungi of the genus *Cordyceps*, living caterpillars are mummified by mycelium, gradually becoming rigid as a sclerotium consumes their soft tissue, then sends a stroma bursting forth from their head

<sup>2</sup> It wasn't until 1981 that the first artificially grown morel was harvested. Ronald Ower, a graduate student at San Francisco State University, achieved a breakthrough when he treated the sclerotia of the yellow morel with a compound developed by Paul Stamets for growing psilocybian mushrooms. It required an additional five years of experimentation, cultivation, and "ascus stroking" before he could file a patent for his technique, but Ower never lived to see his work revolutionize the industry with grow kits and a lucrative contract from Domino's Pizza: he was murdered in a robbery three months before his patent was granted, his mangled body found in a park and identifiable only by the keys to his sclerotium lab and a gold maxillary central incisor.



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to disperse spores that will parasitize caterpillars anew. So valuable are *Cordyceps* to practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine that in 2009 seven Nepalese farmers were murdered, dismembered, and thrown down a ravine by a gang of rival sclerotium collectors.

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\* \*

BURGLAR: But I checked around and I understand that Tommy Lyons had somethin' to do with it and you had somethin' to do with it and one other person had something to do with it—and that's street information that I got.

MERCHANT: Who's Tommy Lyons?

BURGLAR: Used to be a private investigator, you don't even know him?

MERCHANT: I don't know none of these people. That's interesting—that *is* interesting.

BURGLAR: I don't know who would put that out, 'cause I never messed with drugs in my life, man. I mean, anybody knows me they know I'm a burglar and they might know some other stuff but they know I don't mess with drugs—and that's a definite drug-related thing.

MERCHANT: No, I know you don't deal with drugs. I'd like to know who put that out.

BURGLAR: They've got an informant out somewhere, they claim.

MERCHANT: I'll tell you what, that informant is full of bullshit...

BURGLAR: They got an informant that put it out on me and I heard about you on the street. I did hear that about you. I heard that's why you left over that.

It is somewhat surprising that Pollock should have risen to prominence in the world of psychedelic mushrooms through sober, pragmatic thinking. He strove to set himself apart from the zany *hallucinés* and *Psilocybe*-panspermia theorizers of the 1970s with hard, evidence-based cultivation techniques microcalibrated for optimized yields. In 1975, freshly graduated from the Medical College of Wisconsin, he felt most of his psychomycological peers were “riffraff” who sullied the field with their unscientific crackpottery. He took a position at the University of Texas Department of Pharmacology and occupied his days with unremarkable biochemical investigations, a residency in anesthesiology, studies on hepatic opioid metabolism, grant writing, and the like. But he spent his nights absorbed with independent mushroom experimentation, testing thousands of species/substrate combinations in hopes of bringing facile mushroom cultivation into the homes of those untrained in microbiology. It began with the Purina, then moved to

parakeet seed, then to wheat, oats, barley, Johnson grass, timothy grass, rye grain, alfalfa, clover, crimped oats, cannabis seeds, coffee grounds, soybeans, brown rice, milo, millet, canary seed, and corn.

Then came the manures. Sheep, horse, and cow, along with fibrous masses of elephant dung. Always fresh, as Pollock abhorred commercially packaged stuff. He filled Reynold's oven bags and sterilized them in his kitchen, using “pickup truck load” as a unit of volume in his recipes. With candy thermometer and furrowed brow, he would probe tall piles of composting feces to measure the activity of thermophilic bacteria, and when neighbors inquired about the smell or the nature of his activities he would dismissively state that he was conducting a “secret government research project.”

The culmination of Pollock's research was the publication of his 1977 book, *Magic Mushroom Cultivation*, a work that abandoned all dogma and superstition of the period and focused on the economical use of brown rice as a growth substrate, a technique that subsequent chemical analyses would demonstrate produces mushrooms of extraordinarily high psilocybin content. After that Pollock shifted his focus to selectively breeding *P. tampanensis* until he had isolated a strain that produced sclerotia of breathtaking enormity. “He was growing things almost the size of ostrich eggs,” recalls Lincoff. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the *tampanensis* sclerotium was that it was so alien, a trained mycologist with a scanning electron microscope would fail to identify its taxon. It could be carried in pockets and taken on airplanes, and even increasingly mushroom-savvy law enforcement had absolutely no idea what it was. Pollock wanted to introduce his discovery to the world and had a long-nurtured vision of creating the first medicinal-mushroom research laboratory. *P. tampanensis*, it seemed, was his ticket.

Recognizing the *P. tampanensis* sclerotium's market potential, Pollock founded a company with a local mushroom fanatic named Michael Forbes and another physician and called it Hidden Creek. In March 1979, within a month of incorporation, they began a campaign of monthly print advertisements in *High Times* featuring a seminude woman writhing in a macramé shawl beneath the conical pileus of a hovering *Psilocybe cubensis*. Michael Forbes told me, “The first time I went to get the orders there physically wasn't enough room in the mailbox; we had to move the operation out of my house and into a factory by the San Antonio International Airport. Virtually overnight we were netting fifty grand a month—that's almost three thousand





kits." Hidden Creek was by no means the first distributor of mushroom-cultivation supplies—by the late 1970s there was an array of *Psilocybe*-spore and even manure vendors vying for their share of the growing magic-mushroom market, crowding the pages of *High Times* with macroscopic photos of sun-dappled stalks and promises of contaminant-free transcendence. But Hidden Creek placed themselves ahead of the competition by selling not spores but a living mycelial culture called spawn, obviating long colonization periods and doubling growth rates (and remaining technically legal). Within a year

Hidden Creek had become the largest magic-mushroom vendor in the world.<sup>3</sup>

But Pollock yearned to propel himself beyond the riffraff and into the pantheon of alternative-medical greatness. He wanted AMA validation, DEA licensure, FDA-approved clinical trials, the first sclerotium R. Pollock wanted to be the man who not only brought mushrooms into the darkened closets of clandestine cultivators but also put them on fluorescent-lit pharmacy shelves. Doing so would of course require nothing less than a revolution in the American medical establishment, but he was up to the task.<sup>4</sup> Those hoping to introduce psychedelics into the pharmacopeia of allopathic medicine—and there have been several—have always encountered a problem; they simply don't fit into a medical paradigm where the betterment of already-well people is not considered a valid pursuit.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Gray-market corporations generally do a poor job of maintaining detailed financial records. David Tatelman, founder of Hidden Creek's closest rival, Homestead Book Company, of Seattle, estimated Homestead's average yearly grow-kit revenue to be \$275,000 during Pollock's heyday, which would put Hidden Creek in the lead by a large margin.

<sup>4</sup> Such lofty ambitions could easily be dismissed as delusional if it weren't for the fact that Pollock was a brilliant and dedicated scientist; his colleague Kenneth Blum recalled to *High Times* Pollock's "drive to achieve medical greatness in a very traditional sense. Had Steve worn a tie, had short hair, worked under a government grant at Harvard, and sold prescriptions to suburbanites, he would still be alive today."

<sup>5</sup> Until recently, psychedelics weren't believed to address any somatic disorders—they generally exert their therapeutic effect after a single administration, and what exactly they do is difficult to quantify, varying enormously from person to person. In short, they stand in stark opposition to

Pollock needed to demonstrate a therapeutic effect that addressed a recognized disorder, and so he began to focus on the perennially ill-defined problem of autism. With the autistic children of his established patients as test subjects, he started an underground pilot study with *tampanensis* sclerotia. "He felt he'd found something that could treat autism and perhaps other mental diseases," Paul Stamets recalls. "He knew parents who were extremely distraught, really at the end of their ropes ... and so he treated two or three autistic children by providing them with *P. tampanensis* sclerotia and it had a remarkably positive effect, albeit temporary." (Michael Forbes disputes this, saying that Pollock never actually conducted sclerotium experiments on autistic children. He suggests instead that Pollock fabricated the experiments in an effort to gain support from the DEA to conduct officially sanctioned

research—one of many instances of Pollock's using a charlatan's means to a doctor's end.) In July 1979, Pollock applied for a patent on the sclerotia of his *tampanensis* strain as a psychotherapeutic medicine and began sketching plans to build a mycological superlab on hundreds of acres of ranch land. Once he had acquired the necessary funds he would quit his unfulfilling job as a pusher of synthetic psychopharmaceuticals and begin

researching natural medicines full-time. But there were only two ways of making the money he needed to fund the lab: selling mushroom kits and selling prescriptions, and so he began doing both with newfound urgency.

"The magic mushroom people who are always keeping your mind in mind," Hidden Creek's eerie slogan, ran across the pages of every major drug magazine, and Pollock funneled all the profits

everything that has traditionally characterized an FDA-approvable pharmaceutical. Whereas early research often suggested relatively flimsy benefits, such as reducing the duration of the common cold or increasing the expectoration of mucus, recent research has found serotonergic psychedelics to act as potent anti-inflammatory agents and as stimulators of hippocampal neurogenesis. Psilocybin is an alkaloid that bears strong resemblance to the neurotransmitter serotonin, and so exerts its primary pharmacological effect on multiple subtypes of serotonin receptors. It is through such receptors that psilocybin both prevents cluster headaches and induces its psychedelic effects. Although it has many commonalities with such psychedelics as mescaline and LSD, in recent years it has come to the forefront of medical research because of its high potency and the comparatively short duration of its effects.





directly into funding his private mushroom research, simultaneously expanding his home lab and taking frequent trips to such places as the Brazilian Amazon and the *Quercus* forests of Mexico in order to chart the geographic distribution of psychoactive mushrooms. "We hardly ever went out," Mitzi Moore, his girlfriend, told *High Times*. "Our dates were spent shaking mushroom jars early into the morning, and the sex was often interrupted by technical raps about mushrooms." In 1979 alone Pollock discovered three novel psychedelic species—*Psilocybe armandii*, *Psilocybe wassoniorum*, and *Psilocybe schultesii*—and published articles on their taxonomy. He traveled so often that local thieves began to take notice, and his house was robbed twice during South American expeditions. He responded by purchasing steel doors and having iron grills installed over his windows. His friends advised him to buy a gun but he refused, opting instead to have Paul Stamets train him in the Korean martial art of hwa rang do.

In June 1980 the *San Antonio Express-News* ran an article on Hidden Creek, with a photograph of a worker dressed in a Hawaiian shirt merrily preparing grow kits for distribution. They were supplying head shops throughout the United States and were ever ready to defend the legitimacy of their operation with, as the *Express-News's* reporter put it, "30 pages of legal jargon."

Rising to prominence along with Pollock was Andrew Weil, also a psychomycophile and MD often published in the pages of *High Times*, but one with deep pockets who didn't need to deal in the gray market to fund his exploits. Each man hoped to emerge as the great American natural-medicine guru, but to most it was clear that Weil, with his charisma and Harvard credentials, was the likelier candidate. This didn't prevent the two from engaging in epistolary arguments in the *Journal of Psychedelic Drugs*, where Weil attacked Pollock for being a supercilious pedant and Pollock attacked Weil for suggesting that *Panaeolus subbalteatus* induced dysphoria when in fact *subbalteatus* was a "superb psychotropogen." An early photo features Weil seated on a couch beside Pollock, the two eyeing each other suspiciously. When describing to me his relationship with Pollock, Weil was guarded, saying little more than "I never felt much of an affinity for him ... he didn't seem to be very presentable." Weil ended up flaunting his luxurious beard twice on the cover of *Time*, Pollock dead on the front page of *HighWitness News*.

In 1980 some of the last great psychopharmaceuticals were on the road to FDA banishment—

the Quaalude was in its death throes and Preludin had all but disappeared from pharmacy shelves—but Pollock continued to give his patients what they wanted, in the quantities they wanted, as long as they paid in cash. Endurets, gryocaps, chronotabs, gradumets, and spansules rained from the bright-orange pages of his prescription pad in such abundance that the state pharmacy board scheduled a special seminar on Pollock to alert employees about his unscrupulous business practices. His prescriptions proscribed, Pollock is said to have bought his own pharmacy to satisfy customers. An ever-increasing number of new patients rang his doorbell; on some days lines would flow out his office door onto his front lawn. Forbes remembers, "The office was a who's who of San Antonio society. Drug use knows no socioeconomic boundaries, and so on a given day you would find scientists, government officials, and the most strung-out junkies all waiting in line for their turn." Yet in the insular world of mycology many of Pollock's colleagues were totally unaware of his prescription writing, including his third Hidden Creek partner, who asked not to be named in this article. "Mike called me one day to say that Steve had bought a pharmacy and was writing illegal scripts for people, and man that put the red flag up! I said I want to dissolve any business agreement I had with them," he explained. "To me Hidden Creek was already bordering on illegal, and I didn't want the DEA to hunt me down."

Many great institutions have been built on a criminal foundation. Stamets, whose early work dealt exclusively with psilocybian fungi, now enjoys prominent placement of his mushroom-based health supplements on the shelves of every Whole Foods in the country. For Pollock, who was in his early thirties, the prescriptions read like an unseemly chapter that could be ended when his account balance reached the \$2 million required to build his superlab. Pollock took so many patients that some days he made \$10,000 in cash, and his practice continued to expand, receiving requests from more than one hundred prospective patients each week. He began to provide inventive new services such as extracting bullets from gunshot victims who were afraid hospitals would report their wounds to police, using his kitchen as an operating theater. A low point noted by Mitzi was an occasion when he wrote an opioid prescription for an unconscious woman who was carried into his office by several men. He walked a vanishing line between criminality and medical beneficence—in a single day he could be observed offering free treatment to the children of





low-income families and furtively providing cocaine to female patients. He tested the anti-addictive effects of psilocybin in hopes of curing his opioid-dependent patients while shamelessly feeding the addictions of others. He bartered unusual mushroom specimens for Quaaludes and planted an acre of cannabis that he planned to distribute throughout the country in sealed cookie tins around Christmastime. His erratic behavior strained or destroyed many of his personal relationships; Paul Stamets cut off communication with him almost completely. Pollock's last letter to Stamets was an indignant plea for reconciliation and help publishing micrographs of a novel variety of *Psilocybe* with a reticulated spore, but Stamets knew no amount of reticulation could repair their friendship.

Last summer I flew to San Antonio to visit Pollock's office, stationing myself at the Red Roof Inn SeaWorld, a lodging wholly impregnated with the smell of a lite-beer can repurposed as an ashtray full of pubic hair that is, in fact, nowhere near the city's SeaWorld. I began systematically calling Pollock's friends and colleagues, as well as the detectives who were in charge of investigating his murder, hoping to hear intimations of conspiratorial activity, or investigatory negligence, malfeasance, misfeasance, nonfeasance—really fea-

sance of any kind. I wanted to begin with a visit to Gary Davis's house in nearby Nixon to speak with him about the origin of the tape, but he was by his own admission preoccupied with having himself checked in to a mental institution for a depressive phase of bipolar disorder. Undeterred, I moved on to Pollock's girlfriend Mitzi, but her exact location was difficult to ascertain as she had just been released from prison after serving a ten-year sentence for intoxication manslaughter. Following Pollock's death she had succumbed to opioid addiction, lost a suit against Pollock's estate to recover kitchen utensils and stereo

equipment she claimed were her rightful property as his common-law wife, and finally, while driving her Saturn under the influence of methadone and Xanax, decapitated a pedestrian. Next I contacted Pollock's attorney, Peter Susca, who greeted me with the question "How do I know you are who you say you are?" To which I could only respond that I was a stranger, unable to prove myself otherwise. The detectives had long since retired from the SAPD, and so I began the stifflingly awkward

task of calling family members of suspects to ask whether they thought their brothers, sons, and cousins were capable of murder. In all instances the answer to this question was "No."

Pollock's is a sedate neighborhood of near-identical ranch-style tract houses—varying in color from cream to Creamsicle orange, built between 1971 and 1972, with gabled roofs, solitary elms, patio slabs, and wooden privacy fences—once punctuated by Pollock's outdoor mushroom beds, Winnebago laboratory, and the streams of pimps, prostitutes, politicians, and speed freaks who frequented his office. Pollock practiced medicine next door to the house in which he lived, the two connected in back by a large greenhouse: on the dexter he ate, slept, and researched herbal medicines; on the sinister he ran his business as San Antonio's number-one Dr. Feelgood.

Peter Susca had advised his client to get an examination table and physician's scale to give his office an air of legitimacy. Were Pollock to have worn a lab coat, yoked a stethoscope about his neck, and donned an elastic-banded head mirror it wouldn't have been sufficient to save his doctorly image, but he agreed nonetheless and on Saturday, January 31, 1981, brought an exam table to his office. He was due back before the Texas Medical Board in three weeks to hear the outcome of an ongoing investigation into his practice. Police officers had been examining pharmacy dispensation records, finding around 10,000 Quaalude tablets issued in his name at a single pharmacy. A hearing had been called the preceding Monday after two undercover SAPD officers, working in conjunction with the medical board, had posed as patients and received liberal prescriptions for dextedrine following pro forma examinations. Independently, DEA-sponsored airplanes were making reconnaissance flights over Pollock's marijuana plantation near Twin Sisters. A grand jury had been convened to try Pollock for cannabis horticulture. The criminal investigation and police surveillance had caused enough disturbance that Pollock's secretary refused to come to work, but Pollock had immediately replaced her with Patti Halprin, at least the third secretary he had hired within a year.

The day seems to have been unremarkable: Pollock dragged his newly purchased examination table into his office and left it by the door slightly askew, planning to assemble it later. Although it was a Saturday, Pollock worked. He worked seven days a week, starting at noon and seeing patients until they stopped trickling in around six o'clock, around thirty per day. Patti





Halprin, who had been hired only that Wednesday, arrived around one and went next door to Pollock's home to prepare him a bowl of chicken soup for lunch. When patients came into the office Halprin looked down or at the wall; she didn't like to watch Pollock prescribe, as she felt it implicated her in what was clearly a criminal enterprise, and she was probably further sidelined by Pollock's insistence on always answering the phone, which he refused to let anyone else use, in order to keep the line open for business. A parade of herniated spinal discs, stone-laden kidneys, and insomniac minds paid the cash that put mushrooms on the table. None of his patients reported seeing anything unusual, nor did his secretary, and when Pollock called Mitzi at four that afternoon he seemed cheery. At five she began to prepare two Cornish game hens, one for each of them.

By six Pollock was expecting only one more patient, and Halprin went home. When she arrived at her apartment she told her boyfriend she wouldn't be returning to work the following day; it had taken less than a week for her to realize that Pollock's practice—with its unremitting phone calls and belligerent patients—was simply too frightening. That night, after Halprin had gone, Pollock was alone in his office, foggy air roiling above the house on Spring Brook. He answered a phone call from Mitzi at seven, and she asked him whether they could meet for dinner, but he said he still had another patient coming. Mitzi told Pollock that she loved him and wanted to marry, and Pollock said he would not get married until she had signed a prenuptial agreement.

At half past nine Paul Stamets called Pollock. They hadn't spoken in several months, but Stamets knew Pollock was attempting to patent *P. tampanensis* and he had found a reference he thought might be helpful. Their conversation was repeatedly interrupted by calls on Pollock's other line. Pollock told Stamets to call back collect, knowing that his colleague, then a student at Washington's Evergreen State College, could not afford the long-distance charges. When Stamets called back the line was busy. He called a third time and Pollock picked up, and Stamets began to recite the article's title but Pollock interrupted him to say he had to run and get a pencil to write it down; by the time Pollock returned Stamets was exasperated. He began again to recite the title of the article, but Pollock interrupted him once more, saying, "Some patients have pulled up for treatment," and then, "I'll call you right back after they leave." Stamets protested. Pollock hung up.

Mitzi called Pollock repeatedly throughout the evening, but each call rang four times before go-

ing to the answering machine. Concerned, she drove to his office, arriving at eleven. She walked to the front door, holding in each hand a paper bag containing one of the Cornish game hens she had prepared for their dinner. Though he always kept his door unlocked, she found it bolted tight and received no answer after repeatedly ringing the bell. She set down the bags and struggled over the fence enclosing Pollock's back yard. It was the coldest day of the week in the coldest month of the year (though still not *that* cold—San Antonio is, after all, sub-subtropical). It was fifty degrees outside, sweater weather, and when Mitzi saw the darkened outline of Pollock's body lying inside, supine on the floor, she assumed he had knocked himself unconscious with a small explosion while lighting the pilot to his furnace; apparently he had done exactly this earlier that year.

Mitzi climbed back over the fence and started running frantically down Spring Brook avenue looking for a house with the lights on. She stopped at the porch of the Lowman residence. Emory Lowman answered the door with his fifteen-year-old son, Christopher, and they told Mitzi they would call the police but she begged them not to, knowing an unexpected visit from the authorities could destroy Pollock's life. The Emorys followed her back to Pollock's office, where Mitzi climbed over the fence with Christopher. They shined flashlights through the bars on the glass patio door and onto the walls of the living room, which, it could now be seen clearly, were spattered with blood.

The presence, absence, and orientation of objects in a crime scene take on a glowing significance equaled only in places of worship. Pollock's body was found in a corner beside the front door with a one-inch laceration on his forehead, his cream-colored sweater rumpled and soaked with blood, the front of his jeans slit open, pocket linings inverted, with keys scattered in a halo around his body. His right arm was bent, his left arm flush against his side with several medium-length brown hairs entrained around the fingers. His new examination table lay between his body and a troop of twelve ornamental glass mushrooms arranged on a chest beside the door. The house was ransacked—mattress flipped off the bed frame and pillows gutted, their stuffing strewn about the floor. The furnace door was flung open, the contents





of the closets scattered, chairs overturned, drawers rummaged through, the cord of the phone razored from the wall, and the freezer door ajar, with two bags of blueberries thawing on the ground in a pool of melted frost.

The funeral was held on Tuesday, February 3, at Christ of the Hills, a Russian Orthodox monastery founded by the former real estate pitchman and Texas television personality Sam Greene, locally famous for both his business acumen and his transvestitism. Before his ordination he dropped money from airplanes over San Antonio and dressed in drag as “groovy granny Greene” to promote land on the city’s undesirable South Side. But in the previous five years Greene had changed his name to Father Benedict, declared himself a Russian Orthodox bishop, and formed an organization called Ecumenical Monks Inc. He presided over the service wearing a black *kamilavka* and matching veil; the mourners wore white.

Pollock’s body was presented in an open casket, and each hand held a mushroom. The left clutched a large *P. cubensis* strain Pollock had found in Oaxaca, a big seller that Hidden Creek had advertised as conferring psychic powers; in the right was a different *P. cubensis* strain he had discovered at the Plantersville Renaissance Festival in Texas. In his breast pocket Michael Forbes tenderly tucked a single *P. tampanensis* sclerotium. A large platter of funerary sclerotia was presented to the mourners, and a group of honky-tonk musicians known as the Supernatural Family Band began to play. With Hidden Creek disintegrated, these *P. tampanensis* sclerotia were treated as the last that would ever be grown. The weather was now freezing and Conni Hancock, the band’s pedal-steelist, looked out the window to see peacocks roaming the monastery grounds, leaving sagittae footprints in the Texas snow.<sup>6</sup>

When Sergeant Odis Doyal entered Pollock’s mushroom greenhouse he found 1,753 quart jars of growing magic mushrooms, what must then have been the largest mushroom bust in American history. There were also ten pounds of desiccated sclerotia, which had been specially prepared by Pollock days before his death to be analyzed for new therapeutic alkaloids, as well as outdoor mushroom beds, Queenline jars filled with purple honey, innumerable agar slants and spore prints, and several sacks containing the methodically labeled manure of exotic ungulates. Pollock’s estranged father, a real estate developer from L.A., knew little of his son’s research and, arriving in

San Antonio, was astonished by what had been left behind. Walter Pollock decided to defend his son’s work, telling the police they were making a grave mistake destroying rare species that might have medicinal value. The elder Pollock succeeded in stalling the police for a little more than a week by demanding a court order and taking up residence in his dead son’s home. Peter Susca recalls, “Walter had ensconced himself in the home that Steven was living in—and he was a weird fellow, very strange bird—but he called me one day to tell me that a DEA SWAT team had arrived with some kind of ostensible authority, emptied everything out of the house, and told him it was going to be destroyed.” Walter Pollock’s resistance couldn’t change the fact that psilocybin is a Schedule I controlled substance. He met with Michael Forbes and tried to persuade him to move Hidden Creek to Haiti, where he claimed to have criminal connections that could provide protection, but after Forbes declined the offer he flew back to L.A. with what remained of his son’s savings. The mushrooms were carted off by the San Antonio Narcotics Force, transported to the city dump, doused with gasoline, and ignited. Seething cataracts of fire reduced the fungi to ash while onlookers cheered and snapped photos.

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\* \*

BURGLAR: I’ve never been caught doing nothing in my life. Shot at a guy over here and they got me on that. They got me dead on that.

MERCHANT: I got a friend of mine, shot up a whole buncha guys down on Broadway one night.

BURGLAR: I mean that’s the case they’re gonna make on me, for sure they can make that case.

MERCHANT: Well this is interesting, though, there’s even street talk about me wasting a *doctor*.

BURGLAR: That’s what I heard.

MERCHANT: Shit, I didn’t even know the turkey. I didn’t have no reason to waste him.

BURGLAR: Well I heard that supposedly a source said that I went over there to rob him. So I didn’t know him—I never met him in my life. So that’s when I started digging around on the street. I can’t ask any cops, but supposedly ... again it was a Castle Hills source that brought it out.

MERCHANT: I tell you what, I’d like to catch the source ‘cause I’d like to bring a lawsuit.

BURGLAR: We might be able to get down to the source, I don’t know.

MERCHANT: Well let me know if you find out, goddamn.

The strange timing of Pollock’s murder begot paranoia of all shades and textures. Former pa-

<sup>6</sup> Though Hancock vividly remembers snowfall, not a single flake was recorded in Blanco or Bexar County for the entirety of 1981, and it seems likely that her memory owes to the *hors d’oeuvres*.





tients gazed nervously at their inculpatory bottles of Quaalude, Pollock's mycologist colleagues ate their experiments in anticipation of a coming investigation, and mysterious tipsters rang the SAPD to report suspects from all echelons of San Antonian society. There were rumors exchanged among friends of a police cover-up and of a videotape documenting the murder *in toto*, and it was frequently stated that Walter Pollock had offered a \$500,000 reward to anyone with information leading to the arrest of his son's killer(s).<sup>7</sup>

*High Times's* obituarist, Mike Fellner, got from his interviews with detectives the impression they were uninterested in, if not pleased by, Pollock's demise. But even for the most unsympathetic investigator there were piquant clues that couldn't be ignored: a bloody towel in Pollock's bathroom, an unexplained bullet hole in the garage door, the way his records had been rifled through in an attempt to hide or emphasize certain patient data, and two mysterious phone calls from unidentified women the night of the murder. Minutes before Pollock's death had been reported to dispatchers a woman called the medical examiner's office to ask whether the body of a doctor had been brought into the morgue, adding that she'd heard a doctor had been involved in a "disturbance with an attorney." Unaware of Pollock's recent death, the medical examiner replied that no doctors had been brought in that day. This was followed by a call to Pollock's office, at 2:04 A.M., placed by a woman who supplied a fake name and inquired about Pollock's whereabouts, probing detectives as they photographed the crime scene.

The first suspect was the infamous pimp Archie Lee Johnson. Even with Pollock's manure hoard and outdoor mushroom beds, what really stuck out to neighbors was Johnson ominously cruising Spring Brook in a pink Cadillac Eldorado. It was Pollock's stentorian arguments over Johnson's debts, said to be as much as \$50,000, that had most traumatized Patty Halprin.<sup>8</sup> There had been rumors that Pollock's death was sought by no less high-profile a figure than Ross Perot, the computer tycoon, drug-war vigilante, and later presidential candidate who was rumored to have publicly sworn to destroy Pollock.<sup>9</sup> Then there was an embittered shampoo

chemist named Tom Van Doozer, Pollock's former business partner turned archrival over a stolen recipe for liquid inoculum. Van Doozer had started his own company but was driven into bankruptcy when his line of kits suffered catastrophic failure from brown-rice cloggage of inoculation ports, leaving him penniless in a trailer. Mitzi drew the scrutiny of the SAPD following her callous request on the night of the murder to enter the crime scene and retrieve her kitchen utensils. Mitzi in turn spoke of corrupt police exacting revenge on Pollock and of a mysterious local woman she referred to as "the black widow."

Elaborate theories of government monitoring are a staple in the diet of anyone involved in the illicit drug trade, but unlike the middling street-corner peddler, Pollock was demonstrably and very closely being watched by multiple government agencies. The previous September the DEA had become im-

patient and moved in to destroy the cannabis crop it had been extensively surveilling. And just as a grand-jury indictment of Pollock was coming to seem inevitable, the charges were dropped and a bullet found its way into his left occipital lobe.

Finally, and most provocatively, Michael Forbes divulged to me details of a plan hatched by Pollock three days prior to his death that, if true, would be the most shocking evidence of the mental and moral derangement Pollock's ambition inflicted on him. Pollock met with Forbes to say, "I've got a plan: I've given Archie Lee Johnson five thousand dollars for each narcotics officer to have them killed." Pollock had become aware of the identities of the two undercover cops scheduled to testify against him at the medical-board hearing the following week. Forbes believes their names were included in the



## MEDIC'S MUSHROOMS



<sup>7</sup> In actuality, no reward was ever offered by Walter Pollock, who refused to so much as pay for his son's gravestone.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Forbes denied the rumors that Archie Lee Johnson owed Pollock money, repeatedly emphasizing to me that Pollock was a Jew.

<sup>9</sup> Although this claim could not be corroborated, Pollock's profile, because of his books, grow-kit factory, and prescription-drug racket, was high enough that he very well could have drawn Perot's ire. In the months

preceding Ronald Reagan's inauguration, Perot was seen rabidly proselytizing for the "Texans' War on Drugs," brandishing a bottle of concentrated marijuana smoke before rapt audiences, providing bodyguards for cooperative snitches, pushing to allow wiretaps of suspected drug users, and promising nothing but the direst of consequences for "pill-pushing doctors."





criminal complaint against Pollock, though the release of such sensitive information in an indictment is extremely unusual. The two officers' real names were included in Pollock's patient records, so it's possible the "undercover" visit to his office was not their first.

The recruitment of Archie Lee Johnson as an assassin would have made sense; aside from being deeply connected to San Antonio's criminal underworld, Johnson was well known for having attempted the murder of a police officer several years earlier. Forbes said he had tried to dissuade Pollock from such an undertaking. "I'd known Steve a long time. I knew he was crazy. I knew he believed he was capable of doing anything—he had that medical mentality where he wasn't bothered by a bit by death—but I flat-out told him, '*That is the stupidest fucking thing I've ever heard.*'" To Forbes what happened next is clear: Archie Lee Johnson turned the hit against Pollock, and the two mysterious female callers were Johnson's girls verifying that the job was complete. Whoever entered the office, Forbes believes, was acting with the complicity of the police, who neglected to collect obvious information such as a statement from Johnson and phone records from the night of the murder.<sup>10</sup>

There is also the matter of the cassette tape's unusual genesis; while Gary Davis was finishing up his MA in clinical psychology he took a job studying ESP at the Mind Science Foundation in San Antonio. Although Davis wasn't entirely committed to parapsychological research, he was enticed by the fact that he was allowed to spend nights in the laboratory and sleep on the waterbed that was used to relax subjects during experiments. In 1977 he was helping the psychologist Harvey Ginsburg evaluate THC's potential for reducing aggression in the Mongolian gerbil, an animal known for its infanticidal and cannibalistic tendencies. Davis had the idea of modifying the experiment to examine how psilocybin affected gerbil aggression and so consulted the local university's mushroom expert—Steven Pollock—to ask which psilocybin salt was best suited to intraperitoneal injection. The psilocybin gerbil experiments never materialized, but Pollock and Davis became, if not friends, close enough for Davis to recall that Pollock "should have learned to use deodorant and may have had a glandular problem."

By 1980 Davis was an abnormal-psychology lecturer at Texas State in San Marcos and was

living in the apartment of a recent divorcee named Bob—only Bob, no last name. Bob was a recovering alcoholic who owned a liquor store in downtown San Antonio. Bob had a strict rule—he wouldn't accept anything but legal tender as payment—but in the summer of 1981 he broke his rule and allowed a drifter who came in regularly to trade a tape recorder for a bottle of wine. Bob brought the recorder home and while playing with it in front of Davis heard a strange conversation between two men; when the conversation turned to shooting the "mushroom doctor," Davis realized they had stumbled on an important piece of evidence. He rewound the tape and replayed it obsessively for days, and though there was no explicit admission of guilt, Davis was certain that the voice on the tape was that of Pollock's killer. "He denies it," Davis said. "But as a psychologist I can tell you he needs lessons in how to lie convincingly."

Davis insisted that Bob ask the drifter about the origin of the tape, and when the drifter next came into Bob's store he confessed he had stolen it from the seat of an unmarked police car parked in front of metro squad HQ. Both Davis and Bob were "scared shitless" that the corrupt cop would track down the stolen tape and kill them. Just as Forbes had spent years afraid to tell anyone about Pollock's proposed contract hit, Davis and Bob felt they had no choice but to keep quiet, and so the tape remained largely unheard for thirty years, buried in Davis's mother's house.

**O**n March 5, 1983, following up on a confidential informant's tip, Detective Anton Michalec interviewed a man named Virgil Lyssy who had reported that two of his friends had openly bragged about killing Pollock. Lyssy, a former fireman dismissed because of a methamphetamine conviction, lived with his cousin Arthur Lenz, a methamphetamine dealer, in northern San Antonio. Lyssy insisted that the detectives, having taken his statement, mention to his roommates that they were investigating a brawl in which he had recently injured his arm. Alone in his bedroom Lyssy began to confess. In 1981 he had lived in the Green Oaks apartment complex with two other men, Ernest Dietzmann and Jerry Baker, all three drug-dependent regular patients of Pollock's. Together they had created a survivalist "private army" in which Lyssy was the cook. Dietzmann was a disabled Vietnam veteran and gun collector who carried a semi-automatic shotgun and a 9mm Uzi subma-

<sup>10</sup> Johnson was indeed not questioned in the police report, despite his being mentioned as a suspect in multiple statements from Pollock's associates. Detectives did subpoena Pollock's phone records, but only obtained the call log for the month up to January 27, four days before the murder.





chine gun and, according to Lyssy, was both “crazy” and wanted to “hurt somebody bad.” Jerry Baker was equally enthusiastic about weapons and had a large collection of firearms, both purchased and stolen, which he was stockpiling for the advent of “World War Three.” In the month preceding the murder, Baker and Dietzmann had talked openly about their plans to rob Pollock for “big bucks,” but Lyssy hadn’t taken them seriously.

On the night of the murder Lyssy was away in Austin, but he returned the following day to attend a Quaalude-prescription appointment he had scheduled with Pollock for February 2. On coming back he was shocked to find stories of the shooting spread across the *Express-News* and Pollock’s colleagues memorializing his life’s work on public-access TV. He also noted that Baker had shaved off his signature handlebar mustache. In late February Dietzmann and Baker began bragging about the shooting to Lyssy. They said they wished Lyssy could have been there, described the slashing open of Pollock’s pockets, the struggle, and the single shot to the back of Pollock’s head. Baker pantomimed the murder with a finger-gun and then stated: “I put a bullet in his head.” Lyssy also said there had been a third person involved but claimed not to know who it was.<sup>11</sup> He concluded his statement by repeatedly informing Detective Michalec that if Baker and Dietzmann found out he had spoken with law enforcement they would kill him. “They never did come out and say they actually did it,” he momentarily considered, “except for saying they put a bullet in his head.”

Michalec set about checking Baker’s and Dietzmann’s fingerprints against those pulled from the crime scene and immediately found a match. There were two latent prints created by Jerry Baker’s ring finger on the inside of Pollock’s front door—not entirely damning if one considers that Baker was a patient of Pollock’s. But another fingerprint was found wrapped around the receiver of Pollock’s Code-A-Phone—the same phone he refused to let anyone, even his secretary, touch. The print was that of the left thumb of Lyssy’s cousin and roommate, Arthur Lenz. It was clear to Michalec that he had found his third suspect and that Lyssy had omitted Lenz’s name out of familial loyalty. Lenz, when questioned by the detectives, admitted to having been at Pollock’s office with a female friend on the day of the mur-

der but stated he could not remember who the friend was or what time he had been there; seemingly the only aspect of the day he could remember with any degree of confidence was that he had been using Quaaludes. Asked what he thought of the shooting, he said he had been “shocked.”

After he found out Lyssy had talked, Baker fled detectives, and when pulled over by police said he “thought this would come down sooner or later.” Lenz failed a polygraph test.<sup>12</sup> Everything that followed pointed toward the three men’s guilt. The detectives noted that Pollock’s stolen credit card had been found on the road between his office and the Green Oaks apartments. None of the three suspects had alibis for the night of the murder, and all appeared extremely nervous on questioning. It was what Michalec called a “gift case,” a rare convergence of witness testimony, physical evidence, and motive. Yet when Michalec brought the case before Bexar County district attorney Terry McDonald, McDonald refused for reasons unknown to prosecute, and Michalec’s work wilted and was forgotten. In the notoriously prosecutorial state of Texas, where Pollock was hounded to the point of madness for his nonviolent drug enterprises, the three suspects were never charged. Dietzmann went on to become a pigeon racer of some local renown, placing sixth in the South African Million Dollar Pigeon Race with his bird Ajar’s Dream. Jerry Baker became a carpenter, Arthur Lenz a smoker of mesquite BBQ. Virgil Lyssy unsuccessfully attempted suicide in 1996 and died of natural causes several years later. All three suspects died free men.

When I called McDonald to ask why he had chosen not to prosecute the case despite such robust evidence, he had a surprisingly good answer. Contrary to information provided in the police report, McDonald wasn’t actually district attorney during the period of the Pollock investigation. On my revealing the mistake to him, he was intrigued enough to contact Michalec himself; Michalec had no explanation for the confusion. When I filed an open-records request with the Bexar County D.A.’s office to find out who *had* been in charge of the prosecution, I was surprised to find that they had no files on Pollock, and the DEA told me that it



<sup>11</sup> Nothing Baker and Dietzmann supposedly said to Lyssy involved information kept secret by police, and Lyssy’s deviations from public reports are either false or cannot be corroborated.

<sup>12</sup> Polygraphy is largely pseudoscience, though the technique was considered valid at the time.





had destroyed four possibly relevant records. So the question of who is responsible for not prosecuting looms unanswered, lost in a subterranean bureaucratic thallus.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps part of what has earned fungi their aura of mystery is the way they appear and disappear without warning, thwarting attempts to accurately chart the geographic distribution of all but the most common species. Its body is hidden within the soil as an undifferentiated mycelial thallus, and what we see and call a mushroom is a reproductive organ—what the ethnobotanist Terrence McKenna, speaking from the point of view of a fungus, called “the part of my body given to sex thrills and sun bathing.” In 1996, an attendee of the Telluride Mushroom Festival discovered a single specimen of a new mushroom named *Psilocybe telluridensis*, and in fifteen years of searching another specimen has never been found. *Psilocybe alboquadrata* was observed once, in Zanzibar, in 1885, and is now known only by a watercolor. In a recent lecture, Paul Stamets solemnly declared that *Psilocybe baeocystis* had disappeared from North America and was thought to be extinct, only to be interrupted by an audience member who said he knew of a patch that came up every year in the parking lot of a Bay Area Burger King.

But one should not assume it is rarity that makes fungi mysterious, because once the eye is properly trained they begin to appear everywhere—bracketed on stumps, nestled in

flowerpots and beneath gravestones, and with the realization of this fungal ubiquity comes a second-order realization, perhaps even stranger than that of first learning to recognize mushrooms, which is that one's entire life up to that point has been spent attentionally blind to something that is everywhere and always around us. Perhaps it is this realization, and the corollary fear of continuing to overlook the obvious, that drives some mycophiles to such hallucinatory heights of fantasy, to a state of unrelenting vigilance, eyes perpetually narrowed, minds bent on finding the precious fruit others squash under heel and haunted by the knowledge that no matter how hard they look something will always have escaped them.

It was in a short comb-bound book entitled *The Golden Doorknob* (2001) that Stephen L. Peele delineated twenty years of research he had been conducting on the history and cultivation of *P. tampanensis* sclerotia. Peele was one of a few post-Pollock psychomycophiles to work at preserving the world's diversity of psychoactive mushrooms outside state and academic institutions, in a Pensacola-area trailer home he'd converted into a fungarium. Peele, a former police officer from Virginia, used his law-enforcement background to obtain a coveted Schedule I permit that allowed him to grow and research federally controlled mushrooms. In 1984, three years after Pollock's death, he began writing frequent updates on his *P. tampanensis* experiments for the *Journal of Mushroom Cultivation*, of which he was the editor in chief. With a monopoly on *P. tampanensis* he sold cultures of the mushroom for \$510, a bargain relative to the \$45,000 that some had appraised as its value. Peele declared *tampanensis* “the rarest mushroom in the world” and wrote with unrestrained *schadenfreude* that “even Paul Stamets has lost his culture!” Still, he was able to sell the species only half a dozen times. In the late 1980s he began to wonder whether it would be possible to reintroduce a functionally extinct species by laying giant outdoor plots of manure and inoculating them with *tampanensis* spawn. He hoped the spores would travel north on the prevailing winds but became discouraged when the mushroom remained unreported in the wild. Rightly suspecting that his mushroom license was on the verge of revocation and fearing that the government might burn his mushroom collection, he exported a live culture to a European fungus library.

On June 4, 1995, stratospheric oscillations and abnormally warm ocean temperatures in the Atlantic suggested that a season of extreme weather might be imminent. An official warning was issued to residents of Pensacola, advising them to evacuate and take shelter inland. While his neigh-

<sup>13</sup> For Michael Forbes, the central piece of evidence was not inside the office but directly outside: located on the right of the exterior surface of the door there should have been a doorknob, yet on the night of the murder the knob was nowhere to be found. Forbes has spent the better part of thirty years polishing this theory until it shines with a singular importance. The crime-scene photographs clearly depict an empty hole, the product of a knob and spindle avulsed entirely from the door. But the true significance was lost on journalists: they mistook the door's knoblessness, caused by the emergency medical personnel who bludgeoned their way into the crime scene with a tire iron, for an indication of forced entry by Pollock's killers, whom they imagined “prying open the door and breaking off the knob” or “ripping the knob off the front door” (at their most circumspect, they simply noted that the knob was “missing”). Yet Pollock never locked his door while working. On the off chance that Pollock had locked his door, removing the knob wouldn't have facilitated entry—the door was visibly outfitted with a dead bolt. Forbes has no doubt the knob was intact when the murderers entered, and suggests that the door was deknobbed in a final coup de théâtre, staging the forced entry that so many mistook as fact. But were the actors in this crime in fact actors? Was the medical stage of Pollock's office, with its ostentatiously displayed controlled-substance-dispensary permits and prop examination table, the scene of a premeditated contract killing organized by metastagers to appear as the disorganized crime of deranged Quaalude addicts?





bors fled, Peele recognized the coming Atlantic hurricane season as a unique opportunity. He had already been growing massive beds of specimens and attempting to isolate various characteristics into a supposed 914 separate strains optimized for outdoor growth, and with news of the coming of Hurricane Erin he quadrupled production, inoculating fifty-pound bales of straw day and night and setting them outside in increasing numbers. Erin hit Pensacola on August 3 and churned counterclockwise up the coast of Florida, shattering buildings and extirpating trees. Then came Hurricane Opal, which destroyed what remained and left much of the city in ruin. But Peele cheered as his bales of fruiting *tampanensis* were torn from the fields and carried into the wind, dispersing billions of spores into the stratosphere that later rained down on North America in the summer breeze. In mid-June Gastón Guzmán collected, for only the second time in recorded mycological history, a wild specimen of *Psilocybe tampanensis*, growing solitarily in a sandy Mississippi meadow upwind from Pensacola; then he discovered a third in Opal's path, growing on bagasse in Louisiana.

Suddenly there were reports of sightings in Alabama and southern Georgia.

A twenty-nine-year-old schizophrenic Frenchman living in Amsterdam did not predict he would bring Pollock's research back to the forefront of psychomycology when, in 2007, he ritualistically dismembered his dog in a van beside the Herengracht in order to "free its spirit." Employing a technique he claimed to be of Moroccan origin, he slit his dog's throat, tore open its chest cavity, and spread its entrails all over his naked body. When discovered by police he explained his behavior by telling them that he had consumed mushrooms. This, along with the putatively mushroom-related bridge-jumping death, that same year, of a comely French tourist named Gaelle Caroff, provided the media impetus to pass the 2008 Dutch mushroom ban. Protesters stormed the parliament building armed with Super Soakers filled with a *Psilocybe* spore solution, threatening to inoculate the lawns of government buildings all over the city. One hundred and eighty-six species were prohibited, five of which were inactive edibles included in error, but the ban made one important omission: in no place did it mention sclerotia.

Overnight the sclerotium became the hottest propagule in the Netherlands. Two Turkish entrepreneurs who now dub themselves the Truffle Brothers had first obtained a *tampanensis* culture from a sample Steven Peele sent to a European library and had been casually experimenting with the species since the mid-1990s, but the

sclerotia didn't garner much interest. With the implementation of the ban the brothers were forced to destroy their remaining mushroom stock, and what had once been a minor novelty item to all but the most rarefied fungal connoisseurs was suddenly the foundation of their business.<sup>14</sup> When Gary Lincoff traveled to Amsterdam that year he was astonished to find that the species he had discovered with Pollock—one he was certain had long since gone extinct—was being sold and advertised all over the city. The species had not only survived; it had overtaken the market in the form of vials labeled POLLACK filled with injectable spores and arrayed in refrigerated display cases. Tourists were nonchalantly leaving smart shops with what had once been the rarest mushroom in the world.

With fifteen temperature-controlled growth chambers, each capable of accommodating 600 ten-pound bags of ryegrass media, a walk-in autoclave the size of a bank vault, and a double-air-locked clean room where tanks of liquid mycelial cultures are maintained by technicians outfitted in surgical scrubs, the Truffle Brothers have created the superlab of Pollock's dreams. Inside the sclerotium-packaging facility, located in the bucolic pastures of Hazerswoude-Dorp amid verdant fields of ruminating Holsteins and pert tulips, I watch a woman with a food-service bun and a MAGIC TRUFFLES belly shirt smoke a cigarette while weighing out ten-gram servings of *tampanensis* sclerotia with an affect better suited to the ladling of mac 'n' cheese onto school-cafeteria trays. The brothers estimate their annual output capacity at nearly 20,000 tons, a quantity large enough to necessitate the use of a forklift in shuttling the product as it is being processed. Standing outside, one brother, Murat Kucuksen, a father of two with blue suede shoes and a shock of white hair, tells me that *tampanensis* is their biggest seller. At every smart shop in Amsterdam images of their mascot, a blue truffle hog named Mr. Truffles, can be seen advertising their product alongside G-strings and promotional flyers for parties with such titles as F\*\*\* ME I'VE TRUFFLES IBIZA. The sclerotium, a structure that exists to carry the fungus through inhospitable environments, has done its job remarkably.

On my last day in San Antonio I work up the courage to visit Pollock's office and knock on the

<sup>14</sup> Though the Dutch government did mandate the destruction of all remaining mushrooms, on this occasion no fire was employed. The Truffle Brothers recall that disposing of their stock was "the easy part," with psychomycophiles lining up around their farm ready to consume every last specimen they had to offer.





door, expecting the house to be unoccupied. (Tax records had indicated the building was now owned by Pollock's bodybuilding half-brother, Adam.) But the door is opened by an old woman who introduces herself as Ona. I tell Ona that I am a magazine journalist and am looking for a rare mushroom species that was once cultivated by a notable mycologist who worked in her house,



pausing before I add that he was “shot in the head right where we are standing.” Ona takes a long drag of a cigarette through a stretch of toothless gum and looks at me with a skepticism so piercing that I suddenly become suspicious of myself and question why I am here in the first place, but then she invites me inside her dimly lit home, which is so cluttered that I can’t readily discern how it relates to the original floor plan of Pollock’s office. I look around, soaking everything in while trying

as hard as I possibly can to appear affable, trustworthy, noncriminal. I open the sliding glass door to a back yard of arid and infertile soil and immediately know there will be no mushrooms, but I’ve come so far that I get on my hands and knees and futilely comb the sedge grass, picking up small pieces of inorganic detritus and examining them like a detective while Ona scowls at me and continues to smoke. Finally she interrupts me to say I am “making [her] paranoid,” to which I can only apologize effusively and ask that she bear with me, before asking the ill-advised question “Do you know where a burglar might enter this house?” Sensing it is time for me to leave, I stand up, dust myself off, and walk back to my car assuring Ona repeatedly that I really am a journalist, though I cannot immediately prove it, and have no plans to burglarize her. Then I proceed to my last task in San Antonio, visiting Pollock’s grave. (A few months later, Ona sends me a contact request on LinkedIn.)

Pollock’s conception of psilocybin as a panacea, his unorthodox methodology, his numerous ethical lapses—all could lead one to dismiss him as nothing more than a deranged quack peddling sclerotial nostrums with a selfish disregard for patient safety. (This is not including the hit he supposedly contracted on two narcotics officers, a notable breach of the Hippocratic Oath.) Yet for all his failings Pollock was a visionary, a hyperopic visionary who saw only the end goal and conducted research

blind to his precarious surroundings. The history of medicine is littered with similar accounts of megalomaniacal doctors driven to demonstrate the efficacy of dubious treatments, but the potential Pollock saw was not a hallucination: psilocybin is a tremendously powerful chemical, one that very well may revolutionize medicine in the years to come. The past decade has seen a great resurgence in clinical interest: a Johns Hopkins study undertaken in 2008 established psilocybin’s ability to reduce the anxiety of patients with advanced-stage cancer. Preliminary research conducted at the University of Arizona has found a significant diminution of compulsive behavior among all of nine OCD patients treated with psilocybin, and for cluster headaches it has proven so effective a treatment that many sufferers are willing to risk jail time rather than do without the drug.

Pulling off I-10, I drive into Mission Park cemetery. The woman at the greeting center hands me a bottle of water and a gilded business card shaped like a tombstone and tells me to call her if I have any problems finding the grave, which I expect I will, as it is reportedly unmarked. But then I find myself standing over the footstone, installed just three years ago, and brush aside a bouquet of sun-bleached nylon poinsettias that have fallen from an adjacent headstone. With the fraying petals of a thousand nylon flowers rustling in the wind I stare at the stone, feeling a sense of guilt for having excavated piles of evidence that leave nothing behind but a large, empty hole. Then I look up to see a group of birds gathered around what appears to be a large mushroom and run toward it, only to find once the birds have cleared that it’s an everything bagel on a stick. ■

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